The Amazing Story of Christopher Columbus

by Kreigh Collins

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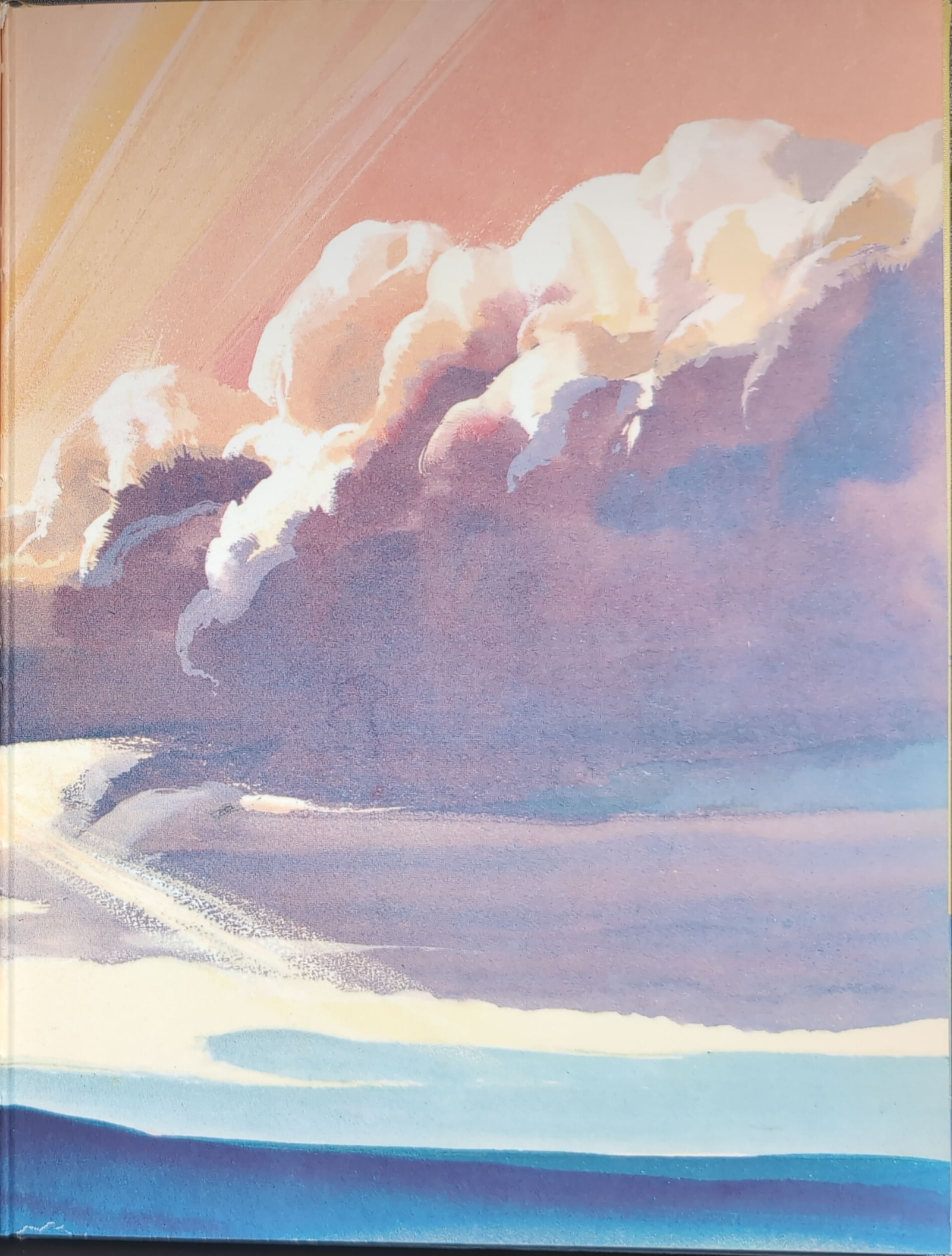

To the Sintz Children
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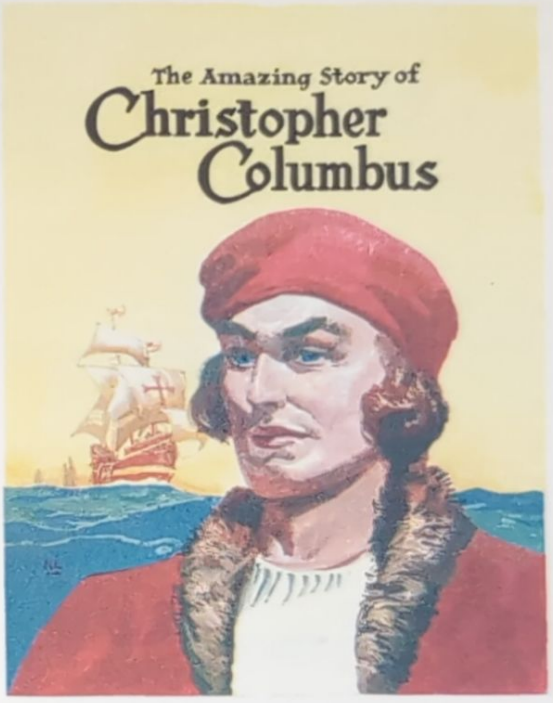
Aunt Helen



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Illustrated by the Author

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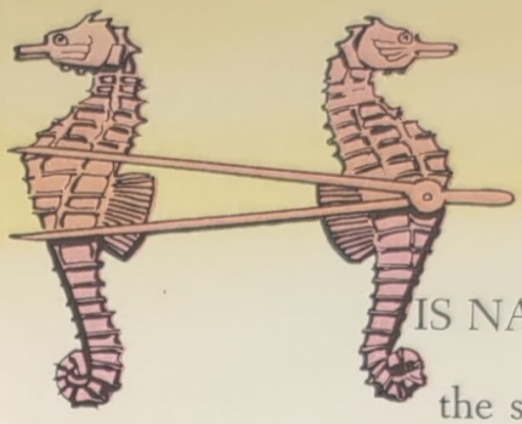
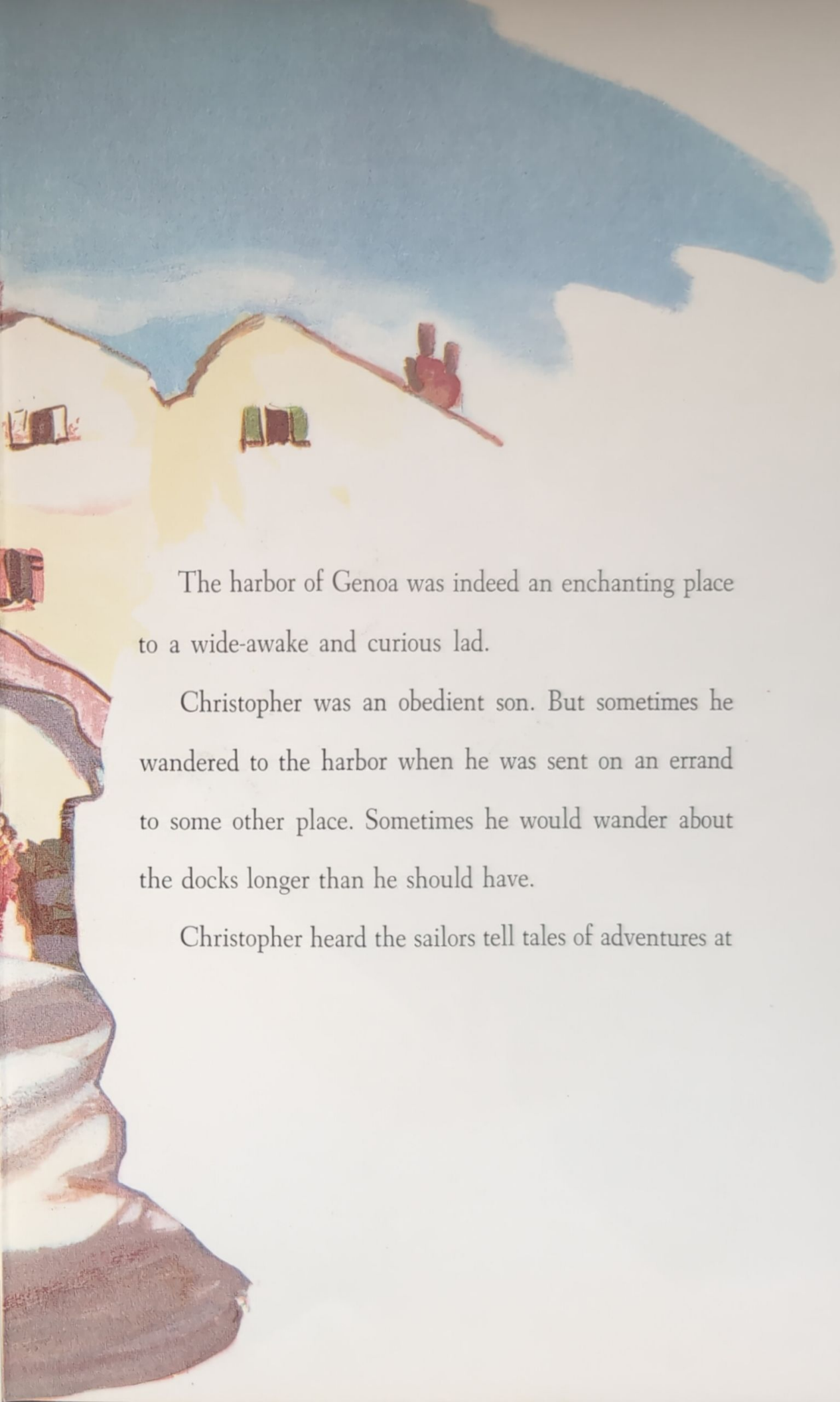


HIS NAME WAS CHRISTOPHER, the son of Domenico Colombo.

His home was in Genoa, an Italian city. Genoa had a big sea port. To Genoa came ships from far away. The harbor smelled of the sea. It smelled of tar, which was used to paint the rigging ropes, and of hemp from which these ropes were made. It smelled of wet wood and the beach at low tide. Voices in strange languages could be heard in the soft air, and music from all manner of instruments.

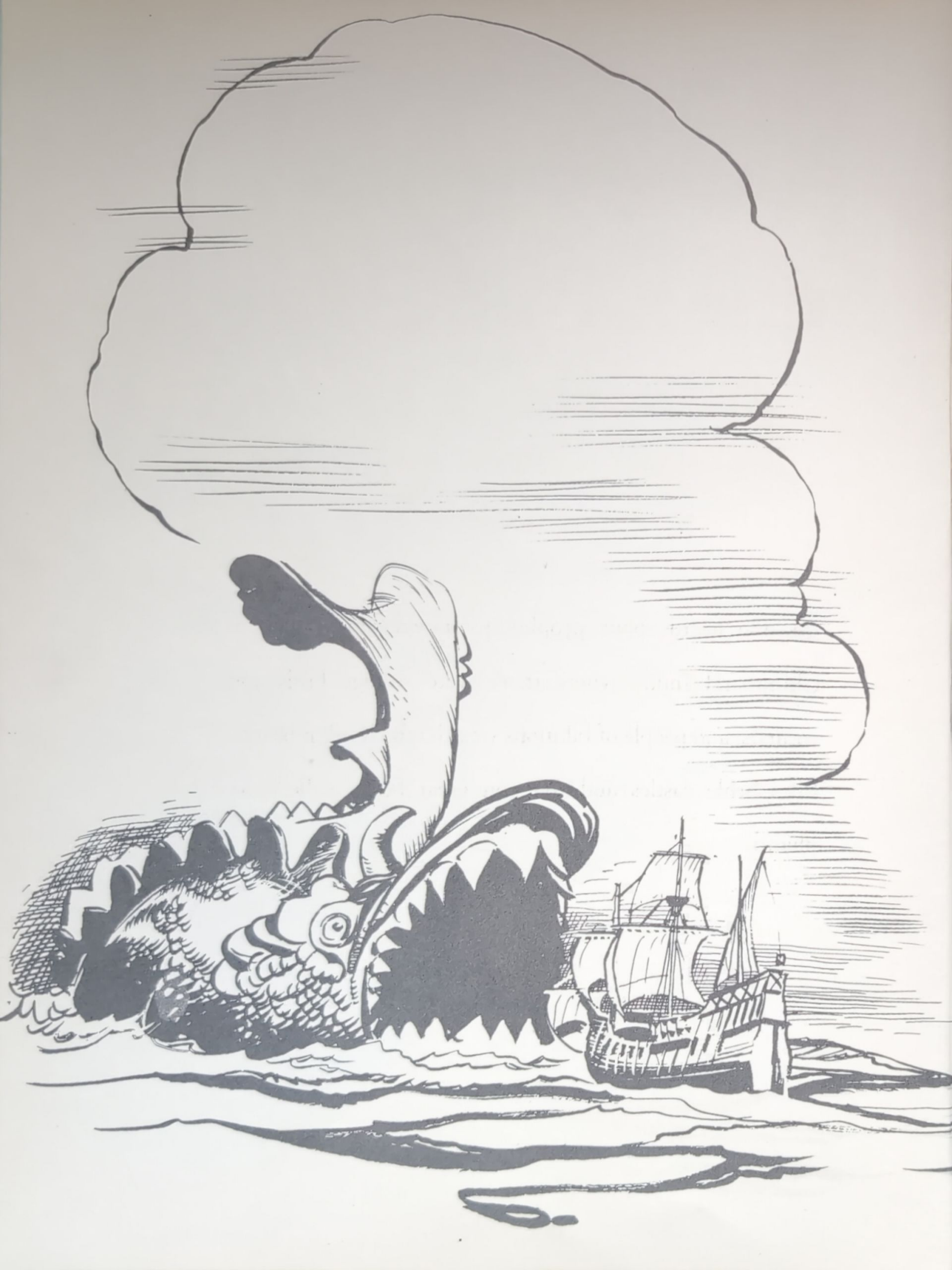


The harbor of Genoa was indeed an enchanting place to a wide-awake and curious lad.

Christopher was an obedient son. But sometimes he wandered to the harbor when he was sent on an errand to some other place. Sometimes he would wander about the docks longer than he should have.

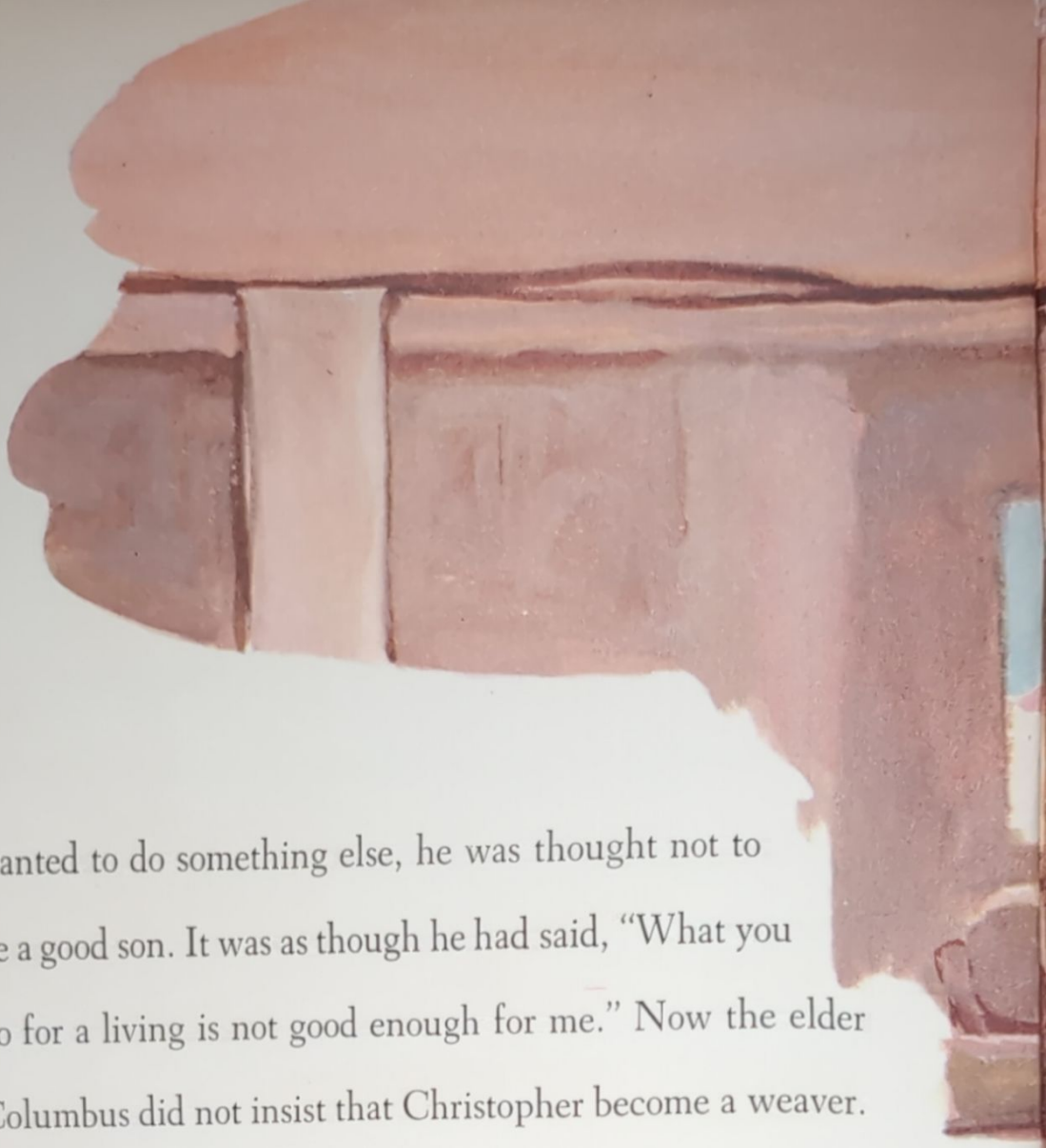
Christopher heard the sailors tell tales of adventures at

sea. He heard about people in faraway lands, such as China and India, where there were strange birds and animals, and people of fabulous wealth who lived in beautiful marble castles and rode on great beasts called elephants.



But mostly he heard scary tales about monsters that lived at the edge of the earth, monsters so large they could gobble up a ship. But now and then he heard stories about the sea that were true. He must have been a wise boy, because he was able to decide which tales were true and which were nonsense. He tried to remember the facts. The nonsense he ignored or forgot. But, true or false, these stories left a growing desire in his heart to someday see these mysterious lands himself. He was showing a marked and intelligent interest in ships and the great uncharted sea.

Christopher had an understanding father. In those days a son learned the same trade as his father. If a boy



wanted to do something else, he was thought not to be a good son. It was as though he had said, "What you do for a living is not good enough for me." Now the elder Columbus did not insist that Christopher become a weaver. He was sympathetic to his son's interest in the sea and ships. This shows that Christopher must have come from an unusual family. Many times the father must have seen

the boy looking out the window at the blue Mediterranean Sea. One day, instead of scolding Christopher for not tending to his loom, he put his hand on his shoulder and said:

"Christopher, my son, it would not be right for you to spend all your life being a weaver if you would rather be at sea."

Nothing could have delighted young Christopher's heart more than this. To receive his father's consent was like getting a free ticket to board a ship.

On that day the great adventure of Christopher Columbus really began.

Though little more than a child (he was fourteen when he went to sea), Christopher was rugged. This was

all to the good, for a sailor's life in those days was rough.

Now away from his father's home, he was on his own. The experiences ahead would make a hardy man of him. Bravely and eagerly he adapted himself to the rough and rugged life on the sea.

Quickly he learned how to be a real sailor. He learned how to sleep anywhere, because in those days ships had no beds for crews.

He learned how to cook his own food, for there was no ship's cook. They had no kitchen, or galley, on those ships either. The place where they cooked, the fireplace, was a sandbox on the deck. When the weather was wet or stormy they could not light a fire to cook with, so they ate cold food and managed as best they could.

Christopher learned how to go aloft and not fall overboard. He was taught how to steer.

A boat is steered by a rudder. Nowadays small sailboats move the rudder with a tiller. Larger boats use a steering wheel. The wheel is attached to the rudder by lines, chains, or gears. Years ago the steering wheel had not yet been invented and in Columbus' time a lever called a whipstaff was used instead. The helmsman, who often stood under a little roof, steered the ship by moving the whipstaff back or forth.

Christopher became a skillful helmsman. That is, he learned to steer the boat so well he was given the title of quartermaster.

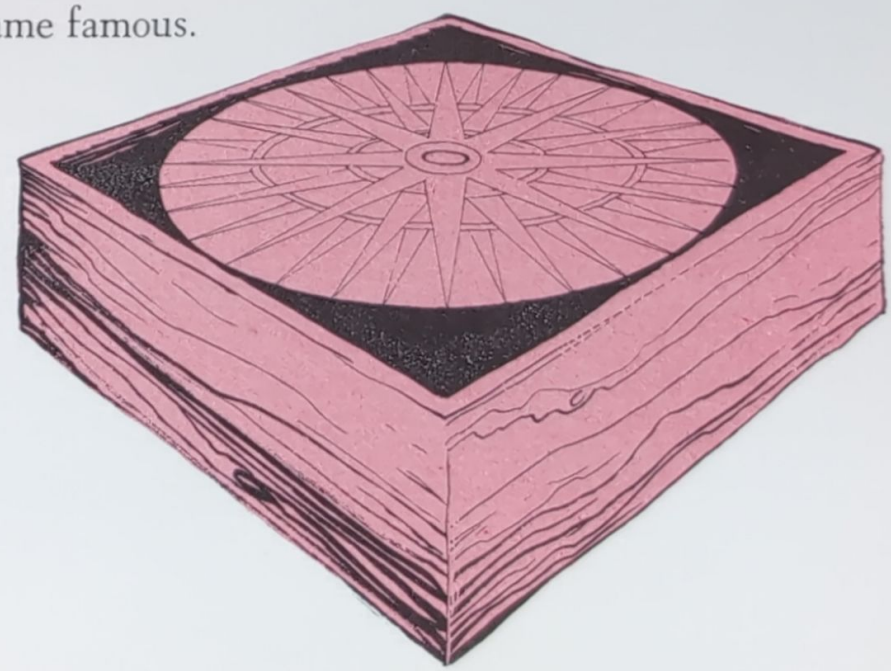
Most important, he learned about the compass.

At sea, the water seems to stretch out to an edge, which is called the horizon. This horizon makes a vast circle about the ship. No matter where the ship is, if it is out of sight of land, this big circle of water looks everywhere alike. Without a compass, always pointing to the north, one can get quite lost. Now while a compass will tell a sailor in which direction his ship is going, it will not tell

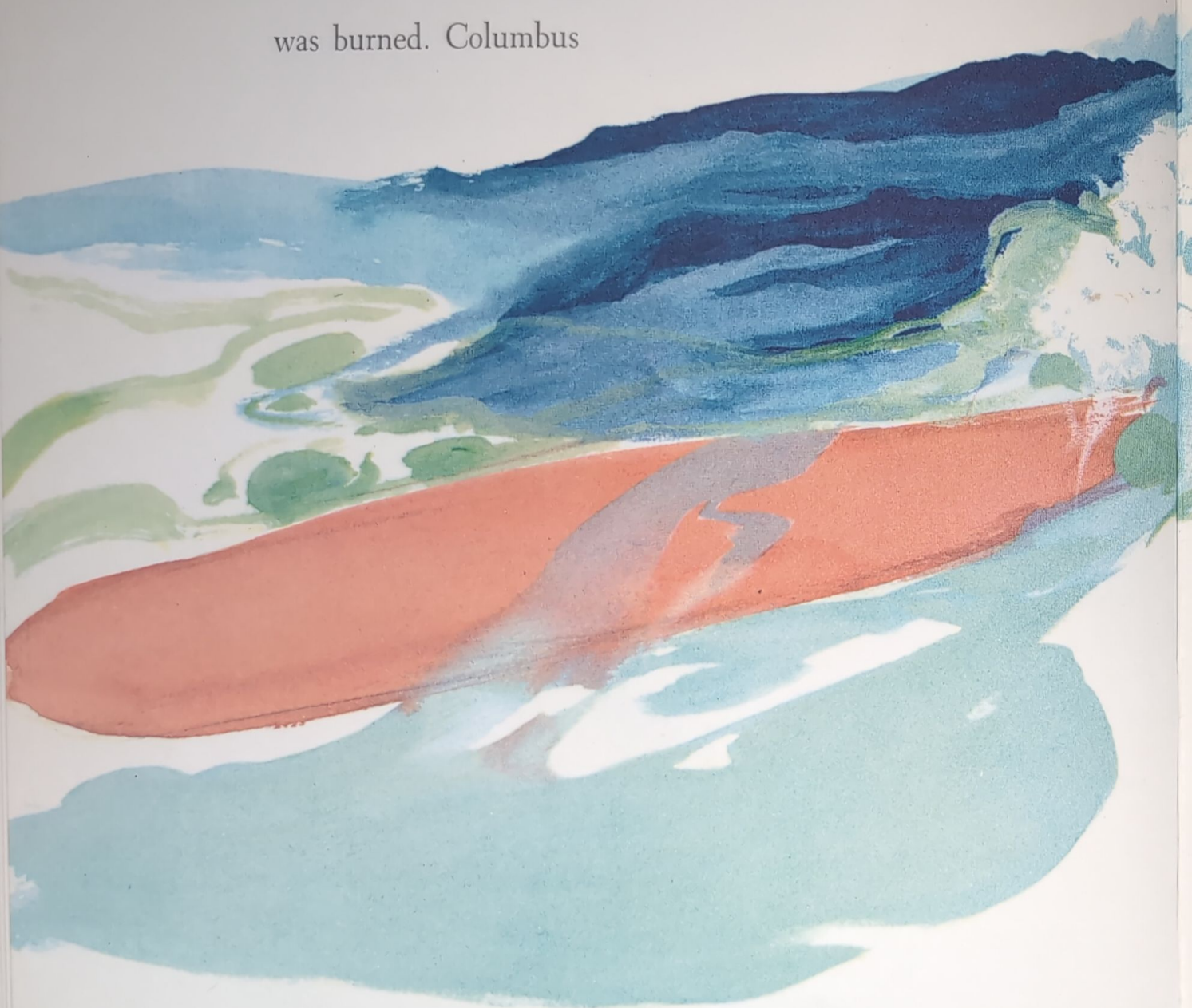
him where he is on the earth's surface. Only those sailors who had learned navigation could even guess where they were when out of sight of land.

There were few navigators because it was a hard trade to learn. One reason it was so hard to learn was that navigators were secretive. They did not often share their knowledge. We can be sure that Christopher studied hard, because he became a navigator at the age of nineteen.

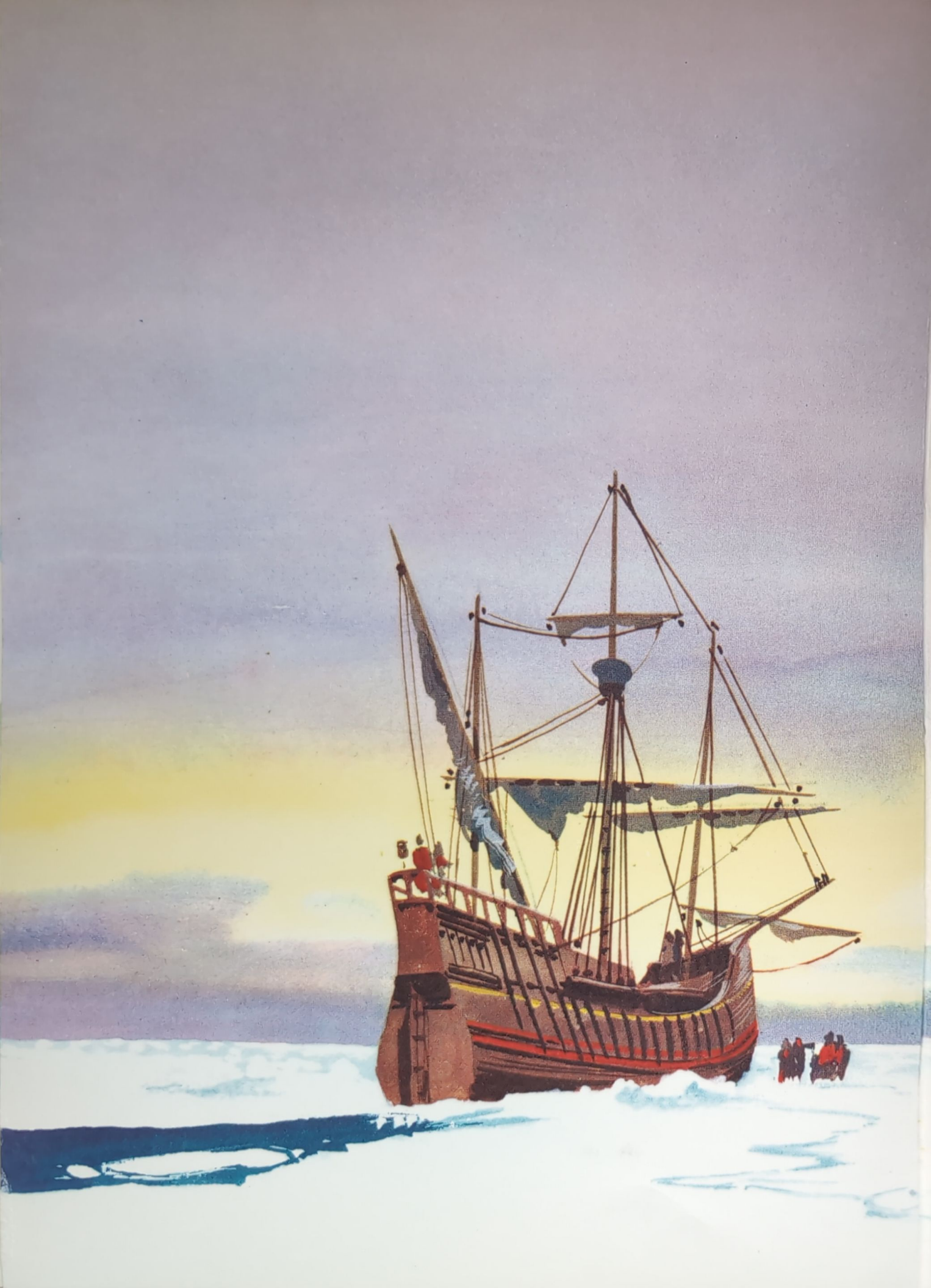
Columbus too was secretive. His own personal record he wrote in a kind of shorthand that he invented. Even today scholars do not agree on the meaning of many of his accounts. So we do not know much about the life of this man before he became famous.



On August 12, 1476, he had command of the ship *Bechalla,* which banded with others for mutual defense. They sailed away from Italy, headed for England. Near Gibraltar they were attacked by pirates. Part of the fleet was burned. Columbus



defended his ship bravely, but it too was burned and sunk. Although wounded, he used an oar as a float and managed to reach shore, more dead than alive.



After this adventure he next appeared in Portugal where he received command of a ship that was ordered to sail to Galway, Ireland. From Ireland he journeyed to Iceland. He even sailed past Iceland north and west until he was halted by ice packs. He was not the first man to sail west of Iceland, for Eric the Red and Leif Ericson hundreds of years earlier had sailed to Greenland and established a colony there. But the world seemed to have forgotten their exploits. Christopher's voyage was long, and his record is confusing, but his ship eventually returned to Lisbon, Portugal, safely.

In this city he remained for some years. He earned his living as a chart maker. A chart to a man who travels

on the sea is like a map to one who travels over the land. To help him make these drawings, which showed the shape of the shore, how deep the waters were, and how the tides flowed, he questioned all the sailors he could meet as they came and went on their journeys. Thus did he slowly learn more and more about ocean currents, and the habits of wind and waves.

Christopher Columbus was no longer a boy, but a tall, handsome, keen-eyed man, impressive in manner. He had married Felipa Moniz de Perestrello, daughter of a wealthy

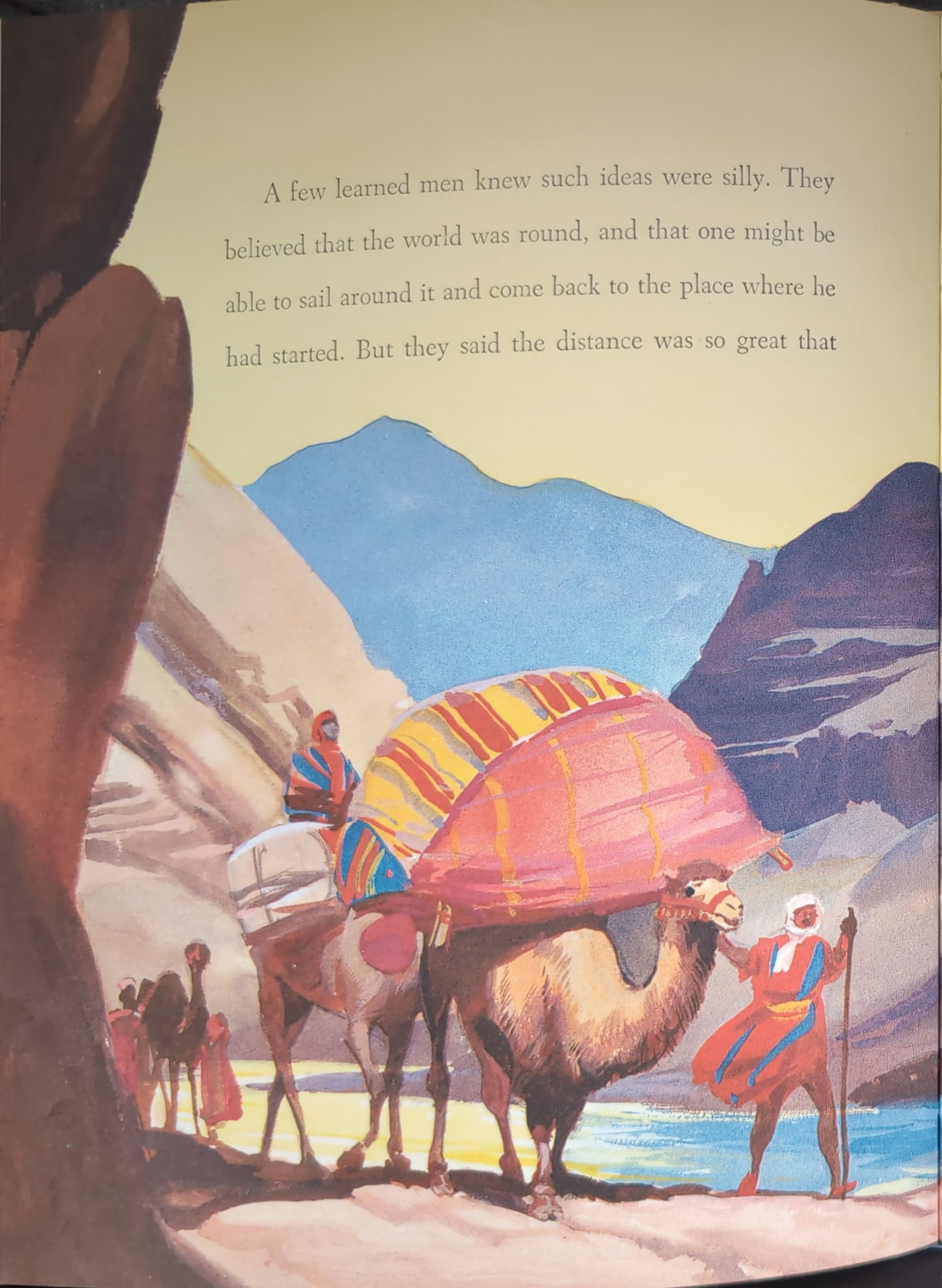
family. They had a son named Diego. Columbus lived like a fashionable gentleman with servants to attend him in an elegant home. It was all quite like a fairy story, that a weaver's son, born in poverty, should live in such a romantic fashion.

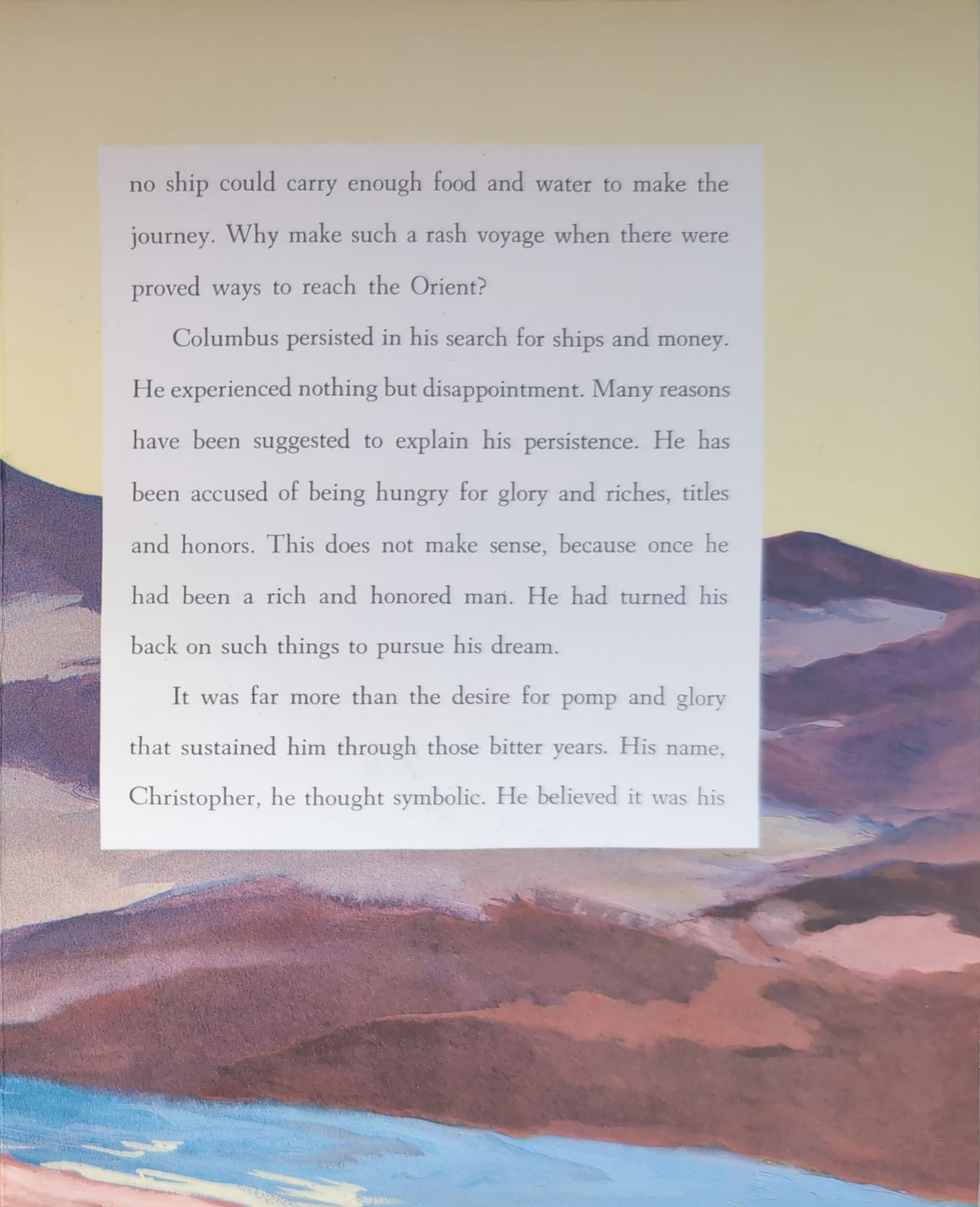
But all this was to change. A few years later we find that Diego's mother had died, and that father and son had become wanderers. They were not outcasts, because they were well thought of by all who knew them, but they were certainly homeless and poor. Columbus had become possessed of an idea. He couldn't think of anything else. He had a scheme so fantastic that many people considered him a bit crazy.

"Ha!" they jeered, "this one would have us all get rich by trading with the Indies—not by the Silk Road, which goes to China by way of Persia—not by sailing around the end of Africa and then north to the Orient. No, he says we can reach the east by sailing west!" People generally thought the world was flat as a dish, and that

if one wandered too far out he would fall off the edge, or if not that, he would be gobbled up by monsters. They were so certain about these creatures that artists were given exact instructions about how to draw them, and after seeing these pictures the people would become more frightened than ever.

A few learned men knew such ideas were silly. They believed that the world was round, and that one might be able to sail around it and come back to the place where he had started. But they said the distance was so great that





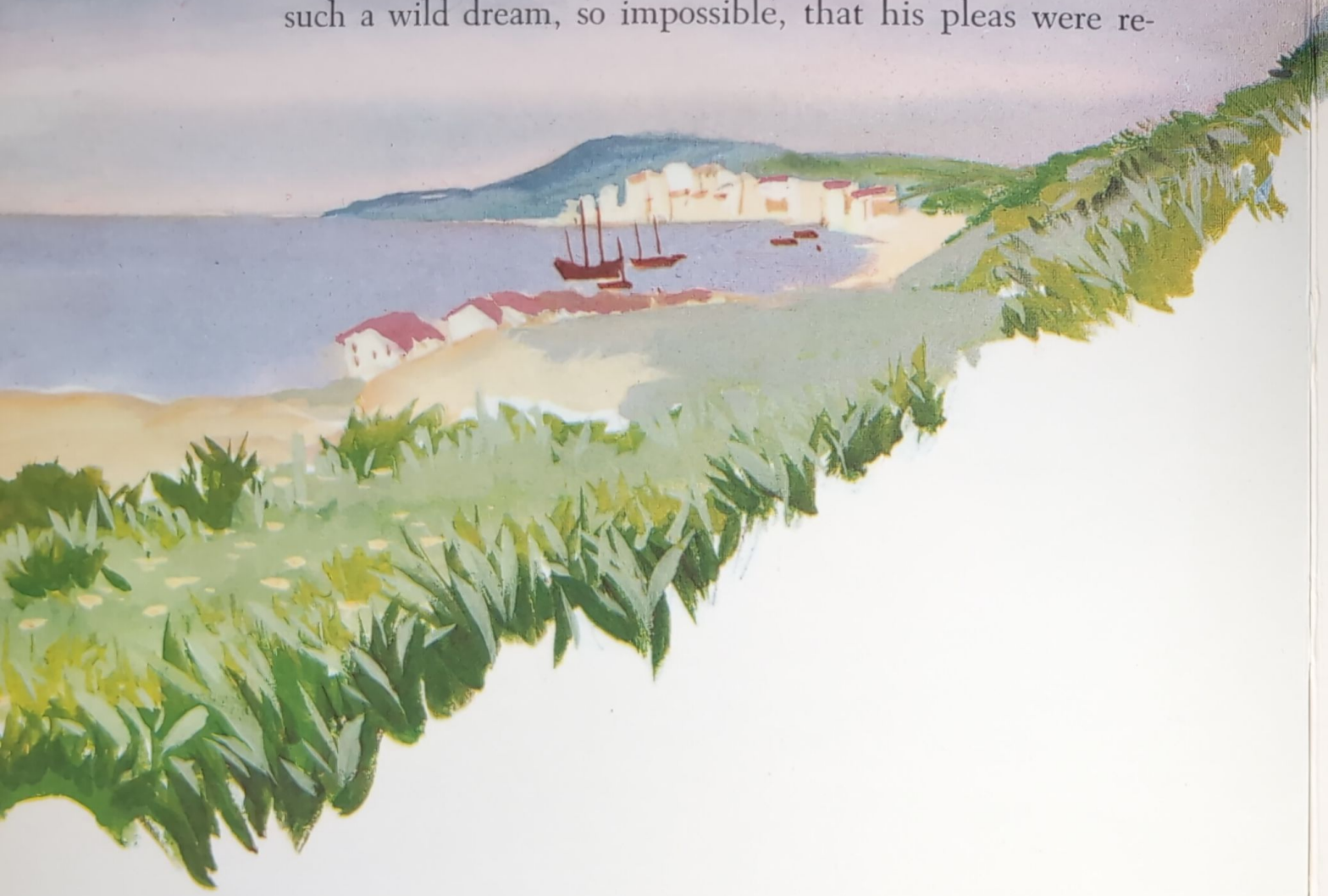
no ship could carry enough food and water to make the journey. Why make such a rash voyage when there were proved ways to reach the Orient?

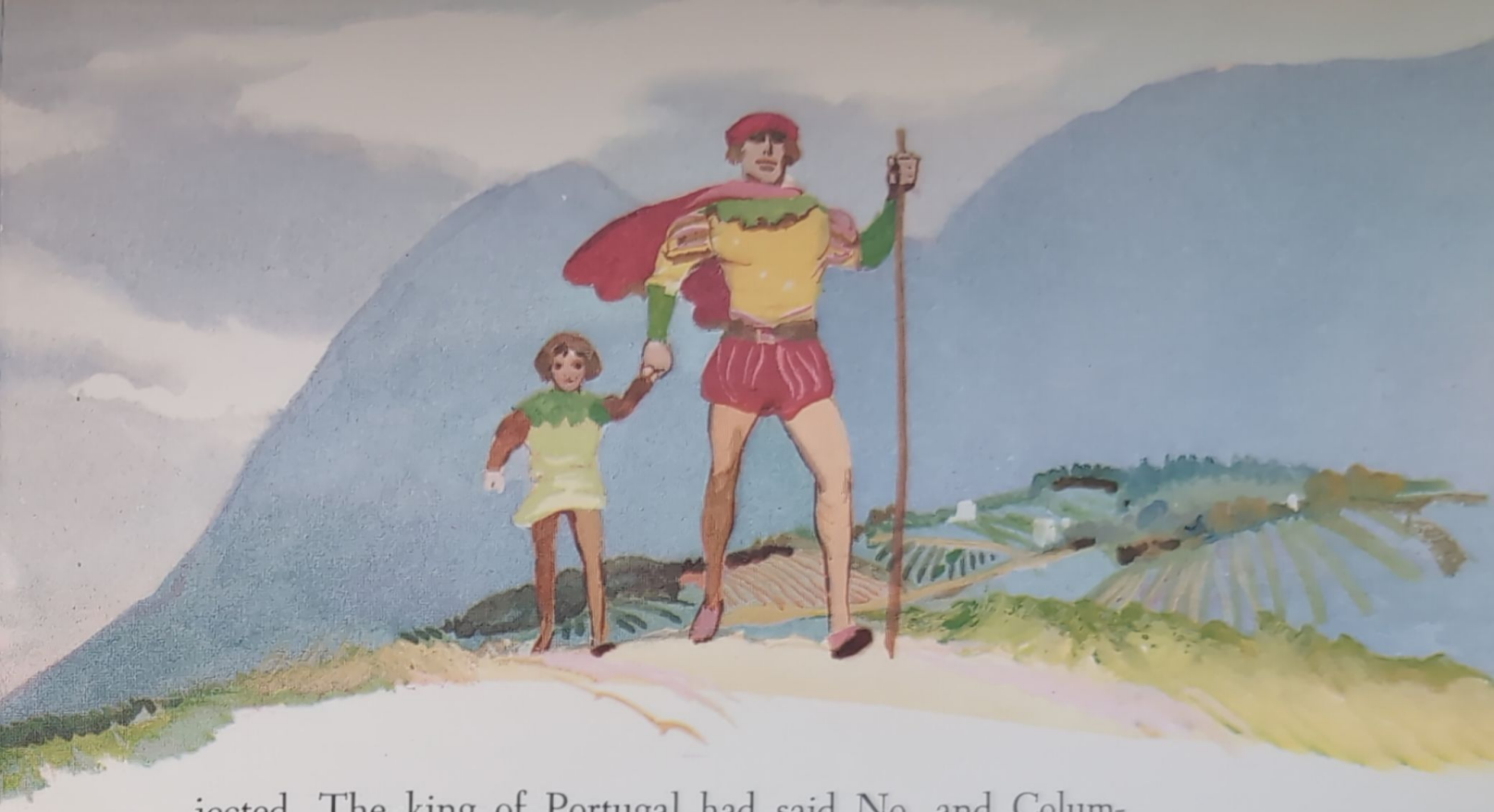
Columbus persisted in his search for ships and money. He experienced nothing but disappointment. Many reasons have been suggested to explain his persistence. He has been accused of being hungry for glory and riches, titles and honors. This does not make sense, because once he had been a rich and honored man. He had turned his back on such things to pursue his dream.

It was far more than the desire for pomp and glory that sustained him through those bitter years. His name, Christopher, he thought symbolic. He believed it was his

duty, having the gift of navigation, to carry the Word of Christ over the sea of darkness as Saint Christopher had carried the Christ Child in the famous legend.

Now while he always made a good impression on the kings and princes whom he asked for aid, his plan seemed such a wild dream, so impossible, that his pleas were re-

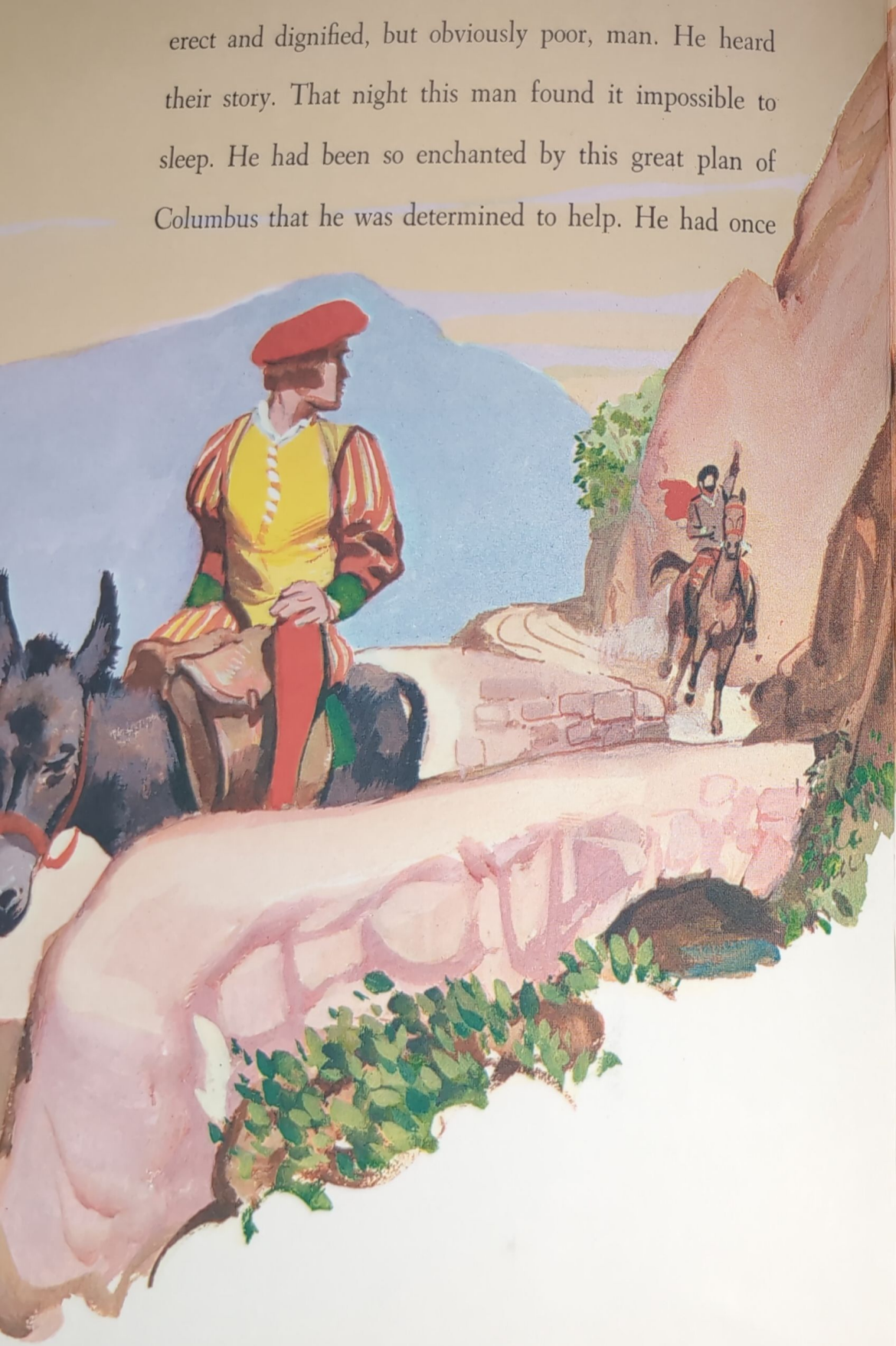




jected. The king of Portugal had said No, and Columbus decided to seek the rulers of Spain.

So he took his five-year-old son Diego, and on foot they crossed the mountains to attend King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. One evening during their long journey they were invited by a kindhearted man to spend the night. He took pity on the footsore little boy and the

erect and dignified, but obviously poor, man. He heard their story. That night this man found it impossible to sleep. He had been so enchanted by this great plan of Columbus that he was determined to help. He had once



been a teacher of Queen Isabella. So he wrote a letter to Her Majesty and asked that the plan of Columbus be considered. This kind man also offered to care for little Diego while Columbus made the journey.

It was a good thing, too, because Columbus had to wait six years before he was received by the king and queen. Spain was involved with a long and costly war with the Moors, and the rulers had thought for nothing else. When the war was ended they had no money for such schemes, he was told.

So the weary, discouraged man mounted a mule and started toward France. A few miles from Madrid a royal messenger from the queen of Spain caught up with him.

Isabella had been so impressed with this man that she had overruled her advisers. If necessary, she said, she would sell her jewels to provide the money.

With Isabella's aid Columbus purchased three ships. Two were small, the *Pinta* and the *Nina*. One, a caravel, was quite large for those days. This caravel he renamed the *Santa Maria*. Although this is one of the most famous ships of all times, no one knows exactly what the *Santa Maria* looked like. Of course many people have made drawings or models of what they thought it looked like, and that is all we have to help us in thinking about the vessel he made his flagship.

Columbus found it hard to get a crew for his little

fleet. The sailors were afraid of falling off the edge of the world, of being gobbled by monsters, and of other fearsome terrors. But a royal decree produced the men. Officials were told to get them even if they had to open the jails to do so. This they did. The men thus obtained were not real criminals as we use the term today. But they were not real sailors either. In truth, many of them were cobblers or shepherds or other nonseafaring men who had been arrested for quite minor offenses.

On a Friday in August, 1492, these three ships sailed from Spain. A few days out, the rudder of the *Pinta* broke. The little fleet shifted its course to one of the Canary Islands, where the damage was repaired.

On and on they sailed. Day after day they stared out at nothing but the heaving sea. The wind, which we now call the "trade wind" because trading ships later used it to sail across the ocean, blew and blew. But it always blew from Spain. The men became alarmed. "We can't sail against the wind! We will never return home!"

"Forget your fears," Columbus told his unhappy crew.

"If the wind blows one way here, it will blow another way somewhere else. We will find a wind to blow us home."

On and on they sailed. And more and more frightened the men became. At last some of them became angry and threatened to push Columbus overboard.

"We'll sail the ships home ourselves," they shouted.

"How will you find your way home?" the wiser ones asked. "None of us know anything about navigation."

By now they had been weeks on their journey. They had sailed through a great and terrifying storm. They had seen the ocean as calm as a pond. Then one day they

sighted a branch with berries on it. The next day they saw birds that do not live anywhere but on land. Hopes began to rise. But not yet did they see the Orient they hoped to find.

Spirits began to sink. So Columbus made his men a promise. "If we do not see land by tomorrow we will return home."

That night a light was seen. So great was the excitement that few could sleep. Their long and frightening voyage was nearly over. Columbus was right after all. They could find land by sailing west from Europe. Perhaps the fabulous riches of the Orient were almost within their grasp. How thrilled they were!

Before dawn the rigging was filled with expectant sailors eager to see what the daylight would show.

The rising sun glistened on a beach, a low-lying shore, covered with palms and tropical plants. Near the water stood a few timid-looking people, stark naked!

Columbus was puzzled by all this. He had expected to see a great city with glittering white walls, temples covered with gleaming gold, people in gorgeous robes. Was this poor land the Orient from which Marco Polo and his successors had brought back their tales of splendor?

Columbus concluded that this must be an offshore island near the Indies. "Therefore these simple people must be called 'Indians,' " he decided.

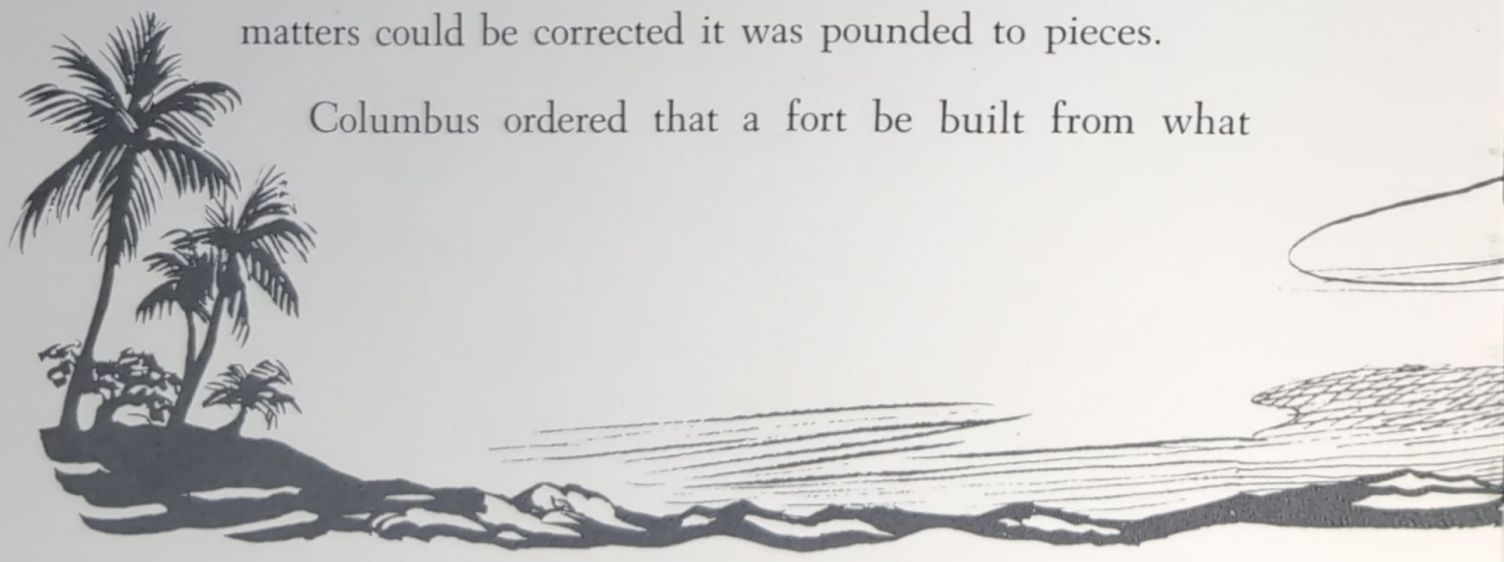
He was rowed ashore, and with great flying banners and glittering ornaments he took possession of this island in the name of the king and queen of Spain. Kneeling upon the ground, the sailors gave thanks to God for protection during their long voyage.

How amazed these simple people, these West Indies islanders, must have been by all this. These ships, so great in contrast with their little canoes. These men with great black beards! For since these islanders had no beards they did not need to shave. Who were these strange men who came from these great boats wearing a kind of bright and shiny coat (their armor) and who had great logs (cannon) that made a terrible noise?

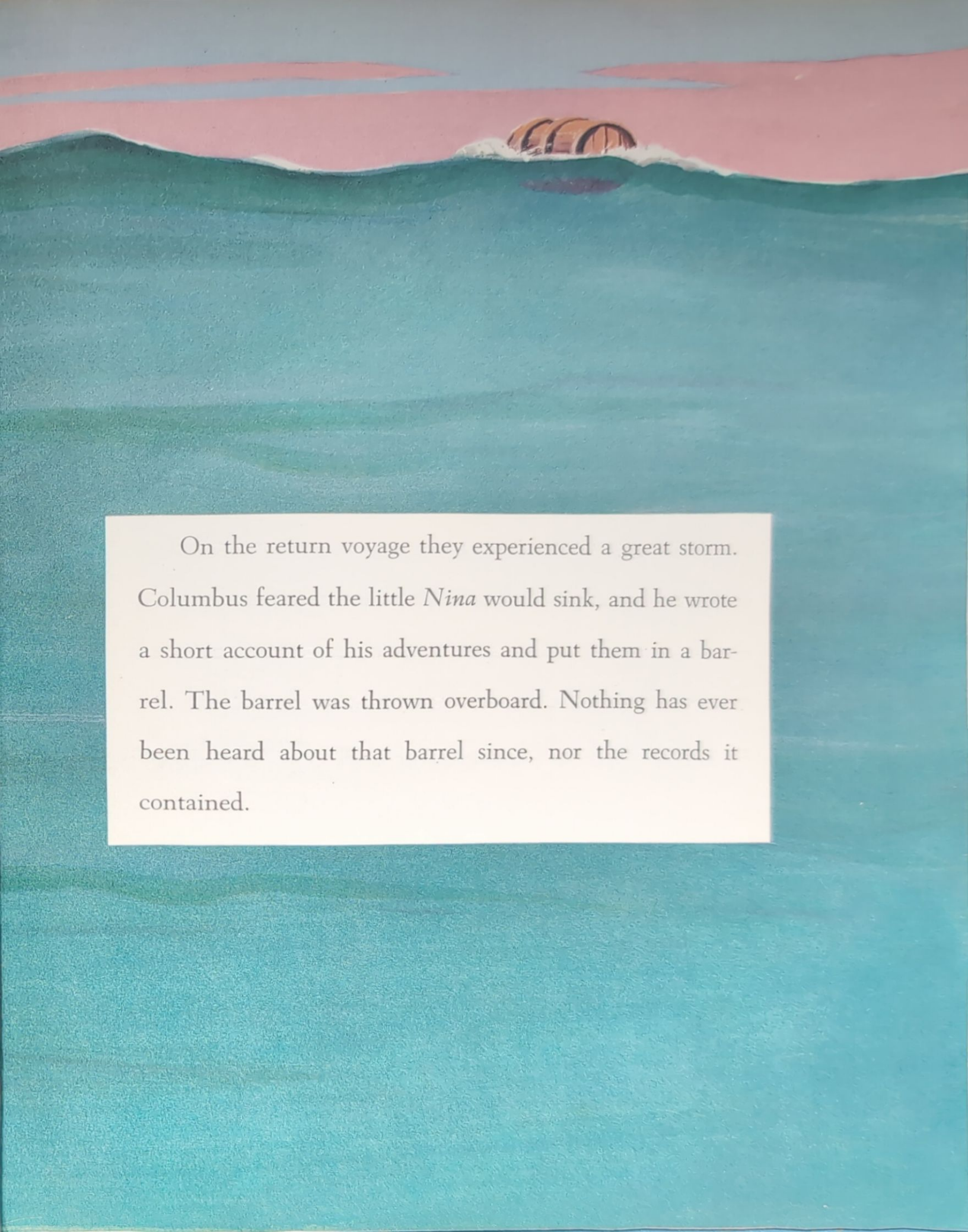
The little fleet went on. Columbus sailed from island to island. He was seeking the great cities of the Chinese emperors, the great temples of India. All he found were simple people living in thatched huts.

He was certain that he could find the fabulous cities of the great Khan, if he only looked further. They voyaged along. Some days later they were off the island now called Haiti. Here they took shelter because of a storm. Exhausted, Columbus went to sleep. Only a cabin boy remained awake as the "watch." He too fell asleep! In the night the *Santa Maria* drifted onto a reef, and before matters could be corrected it was pounded to pieces.

Columbus ordered that a fort be built from what



remained of the ship, and left two score men to garrison it. Then he continued on his way with his remaining ships. But supplies began to run short, and he decided that his expedition should return to Spain. He was positive that if he embarked on a second voyage with more men and more ships he would find the great Oriental ports.



On the return voyage they experienced a great storm. Columbus feared the little *Nina* would sink, and he wrote a short account of his adventures and put them in a barrel. The barrel was thrown overboard. Nothing has ever been heard about that barrel since, nor the records it contained.

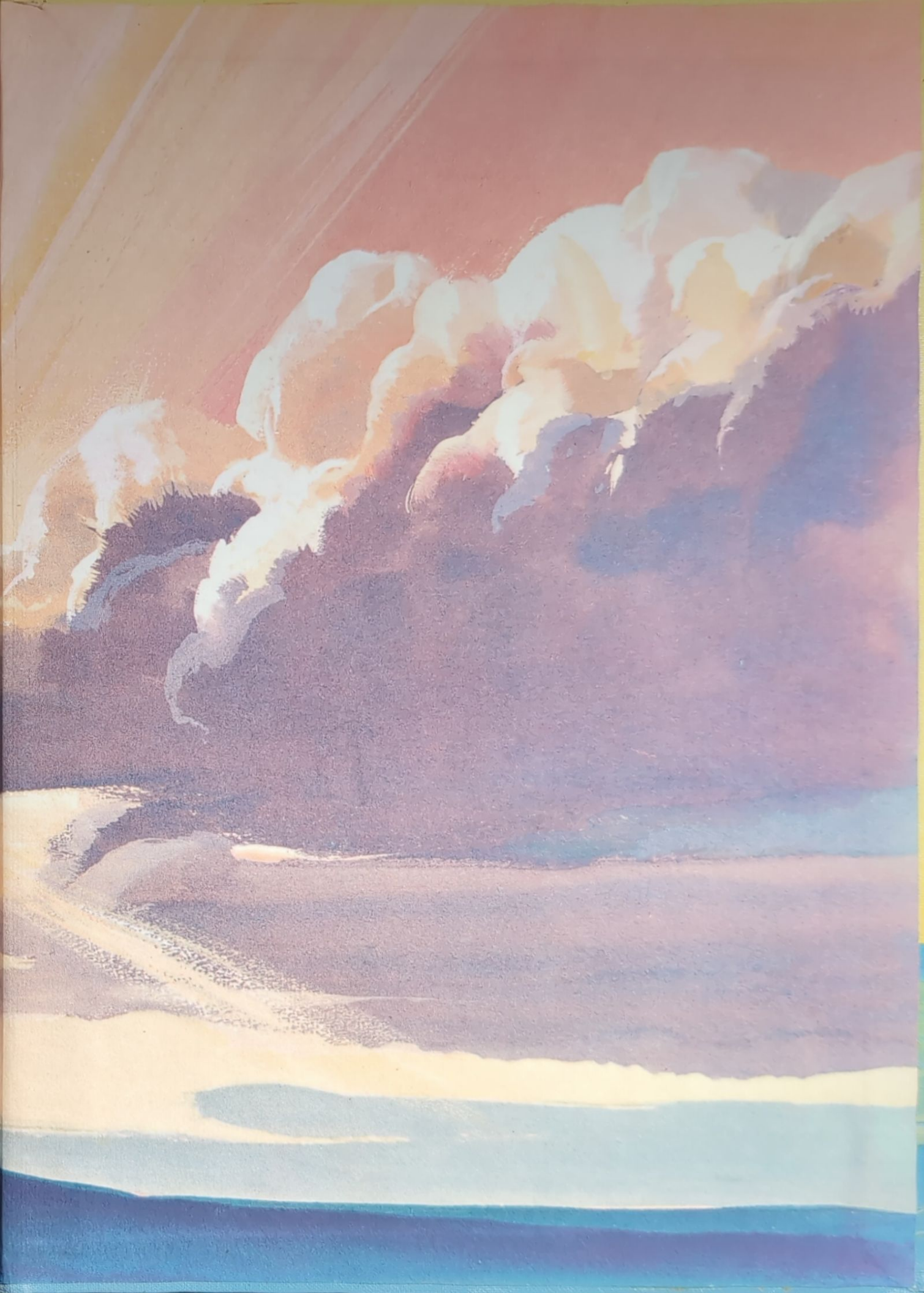
Martin Pinzon, the captain of the other vessel, the *Pinta,* pretended that he got separated from his commander in the storm. The real truth is that he hurried on ahead. He wanted to get the credit for the discoveries himself. He did arrive first, but the king and queen refused to see him. They wanted to hear the account from Columbus himself.

The great discoverer stopped in the Azores and was detained by the Portuguese governor for nearly a week.

When at last Columbus arrived in Spain, his little ship was all that remained of his fleet of three vessels. A triumphant procession was arranged to escort the great discoverer from the port of Palos to Barcelona. How the

simple country people must have stared at this parade! There were red Indians in feathers and with gaudy things about their arms and necks. Men carried monkeys and parrots and strange kinds of fruit. To add to the dusty confusion was a train of gaily decorated mules loaded with presents for their majesties.

At last this amazing man arrived at the court and was directly led to their presence. Queen Isabella was startled to see the change in Columbus. The man was gaunt, and white haired. But he still carried himself almost like a king. He had earned his title, the Admiral of the Ocean Sea.

Then the king and queen of Spain did an unheard-of act. They both rose to receive him, and he was invited to sit with them and tell his story.

And so returned Christopher Columbus, once the son of a weaver, now a man who would be known for all ages.